Paul Didn't Mean In The Sky

A rereading of
1 Thessalonians 4:13-17

D. J. Hodges

Table of Contents

Copyright....2
Thanks....2
Introduction....3
Chapter 1 Paul's Audience....4
Chapter 2 Torah, Prophets and Writings....5
Chapter 3 Getting Some Fresh Air....7
Chapter 4 Putting it together....9
Chapter 5 Conclusion....11
Bibliography....12
Terminology....12
About the Author....12

Copyright

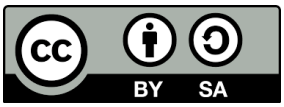
Quotations from World English Bible Updated are public domain. Marked (WEBU).

Quotations from Brown-Driver-Briggs A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament are public domain. Marked (BDB)

Quotations from A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament, Abbott-Smith are public domain. Marked (Abbot-Smith)

Paul Didn't Mean In The Sky, D. J. Hodges, Jan 2025, CC BY-SA 4.0

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/



Thanks

Thanks to Gareth and Luke for proofing the text.

Thanks to my Family for putting up with me as I wrote and edited the book.

Introduction

This book is the product of research I carried out during the regular bible study group I attend. The topic had been Revelation in line with the Sunday readings, however, this naturally lead to looking at the oddity of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Let us look at the passage concerning the day of the Lord.

13 But we don't want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those who have fallen asleep, so that you don't grieve like the rest, who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 15 For this we tell you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will in no way precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with God's trumpet. The dead in Christ will rise first, 17 then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. So we will be with the Lord forever.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 (WEBU)

Whilst looking at the scripture it struck me that Paul was talking about known prophecies and providing insight on how they link together. Unfortunately, without the knowledge of the scripture Paul is referencing, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 can be easily misunderstood. This has lead to much misunderstanding in eschatology[1] in particular it has fed the false theology of the rapture where the church is taken away to heaven. There are other views such as the church going out to meet Jesus in the sky as a royal reception party would have received a king into a city. These views do not fit into the context of which Paul is writing and ignore the style of teaching he is using.

To provide some clarity around on this topic, within this short study we will look at the necessary background information that is required to interpret Paul's teaching. Knowledge of the audience to whom he is writing, the specific scriptures and the understanding of the first coming of the Messiah Jesus, are all required for the interpretation. I hope that the explanation provided sheds light on what he is teaching and increases everyone's understanding.

1 Study of the end times.

Chapter 1 Paul's Audience

The Thessalonians are a group of both Jewish and Gentile believers that Paul had previously taught as mentioned in Acts.

1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 Paul, as was his custom, went in to them; and for three Sabbath days reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." 4 Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas: of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and not a few of the chief women.

Acts 17:1-4 (WEBU).

As mentioned he had previously spent at least 3 weeks with them teaching how to live right before God (1 Thessalonians 4:1) and explaining the prophecies (Acts 17:2-3). With Paul being a disciple of both Gamliel[2] and Jesus, he is well versed in the interpretation of the Old Testament and appears to be happy that the believers had understood and were putting into practice the teaching at the report of Timothy (1 Thessalonians 3:6).

The teaching style in which Paul is explaining the text comes directly from the Pharisaic (Rabbinic) style of teaching in which he studied. The explanation of how to live rightly before God and of the first coming of the Messiah was taught to the community at Thessalonica during his visit. What is key to understand about this teaching, is the core Jewish element he spoke to were not ignorant of the scriptures. In fact they would be familiar with the Torah[3] and Haftarah[4] readings every Shabbat and would have had other Rabbis providing explanation on compliance with the Torah in particular.

It is with this background knowledge that we must realise that an understanding of Torah, the Prophets and the Writings is required to understand what Paul says in the epistle. In the verses 13-17 Paul is providing further teaching on scripture that is known to the believers, but piecing it together in light of the first coming of Jesus. For us to understand the scriptural context Paul is referencing, we will do a whistle stop tour of the scripture required.

2 Gamliel is a well renowned Rabbi from the second temple period.
3 First five books of the Bible.
4 The reading from the Prophets after the Torah portion had been read.

Chapter 2 Torah, Prophets and Writings

Let us first visit the Torah, Moses and his meeting with God on Mount Sinai. When Moses meets with God it is with great drama, loud thunder and clouds envelop the mountain top.

16 On the third day, when it was morning, there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain, and the sound of an exceedingly loud trumpet; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. 17 Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the lower part of the mountain. 18 All of Mount Sinai smoked, because the LORD descended on it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. 19 When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by a voice. 20 The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. The LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

Exodus 19:16-20 (WEBU)

We also see in Deuteronomy that the clouds and fire are referenced as the glory of God.

22 The LORD spoke these words to all your assembly on the mountain out of the middle of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice. He added no more. He wrote them on two stone tablets, and gave them to me. 23 When you heard the voice out of the middle of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, even all the heads of your tribes, and your elders; 24 and you said, “Behold, the LORD our God has shown us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the middle of the fire. We have seen today that God does speak with man, and he lives.

Deuteronomy 5:22-24 (WEBU)

Next we venture to the prophets Ezekiel and Zechariah and the writings of Daniel. The Messiah is to come to the Mount of Olives, the dead will rise and he will then enter the temple and dwell with his people forever. Mount of Olives is the landing zone for the second coming as stated in Zechariah:

4 His feet will stand in that day on the Mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, making a very great valley. Half of the mountain will move toward the north, and half of it toward the south. 5 You shall flee by the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azel. Yes, you shall flee, just like you fled from before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. The LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with you.* 6 It will happen in that day that there will not be light, cold, or frost. 7 It will be a unique day which is known to the LORD—not day, and not night; but it will come to pass that at evening time there will be light.

Zechariah 14:4-7 (WEBU)

Daniel was shown that the dead will rise and be judged:

“At that time Michael will stand up, the great prince who stands for the children of your people; and there will be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time. At that time your people will be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who are wise will shine as the brightness of the expanse. Those who turn many to righteousness will shine as the stars forever and ever. 4 But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, even to the time of the end. Many will run back and forth, and knowledge will be increased.”

Daniel 12:1-4 (WEBU)

Ezekiel was shown that God will dwell with the children of Israel forever:

4 The LORD’s glory came into the house by the way of the gate which faces toward the east. 5 The Spirit took me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the LORD’s glory filled the house. 6 I heard one speaking to me out of the house, and a man stood by me. 7 He said to me, “Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet, where I will dwell among the children of Israel forever. The house of Israel will no more defile my holy name, neither they nor their kings, by their prostitution and by the dead bodies of their kings in their high places;

Ezekiel 43: 4-7 (WEBU)

There are many other references to the day of the Lord in the Old Testament, but these are sufficient to get a good understanding of what Paul is talking about.

Chapter 3 Getting Some Fresh Air

Let us now look more closely at the words Paul has used in greek and their meanings. Firstly I must address the word meaning “caught up” or ἁρπαγησόμεθα (ar-pa-gay-so-me-tha). Many nowadays, preach of “Rapture” because in the Latin translation the word is rapturo and is therefore “in the Bible” as a real thing that will happen. However, what Paul is trying to show is that it will be an unavoidable meeting with God. Looking at the Torah we see in Deuteronomy 29:19

and it happen, when he hears the words of this curse, that he bless himself in his heart, saying, “I shall have peace, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart,” to destroy the moist with the dry. (WEBU)

The moist being destroyed with the dry is the same idea and expression of being caught up together with the Lord. The word is ספות (se-fot) here the plural of ספה (sa-fah) which can be taken as snatch away, catch up, sweep away, and gather or add depending on grammar. it is this same forcefulness that I believe Paul is trying to impart to an audience who would be used to this idea. Here is the BDB entry for ספות:

[סָפָה] vb. sweep or snatch away, catch up (NH סְפָא ,ספי collect (rare), 𝔊 סְפִי (rare), Syriac ܣܦܐ collect, pick up; Arabic سَفَا of wind, raise dust and carry it away Lane1377 [v. שָׂפָה]);—

Qal 1. intrans.: Pf. 3 fs. סָפְתָה Je 12:4 be snatched away (read poss. [סוף] סֻפָּה). 2. trans.: Impf. 3 fs. תִּסְפֶּה Is 7:20 sweep away beard; 2 ms. תִּסְפֶּה Gn 18:23, 24 sweep away indiscriminately (good and bad); Inf. cstr. סְפוֹת Dt 29:18 to snatch away the moist with the dry (proverb. expression, cf. Dr), sf. לִסְפוֹתָהּ ψ 40:15 to snatch it away.—סְפוֹת Nu 32:14; Is 30:1 v. יסף וְסָפֹתִי Am 3:15 v. סוף.

Niph. Pf. 3 ms. וְנִסְפָּה consec. 1 S 26:10; Impf. 2 ms. תִּסָּפֶה Gn 19:15, 17; 1 s. 1 אֵסָּפֶה S 27:1; 2 mpl. תִּסָּפוּ Nu 16:26, 1 תִּסָּפְּפוּS 12:25; Pt. נִסְפֶּה Is 13:15; Pr 13:23 (1 Ch 21:12 v. infr.);— 1. be swept away, destroyed, Gn 19:15 (בַּעֲוֹן הָעִיר by reason of the iniquity of the city), v 17 (both J), Nu 16:26 (JE) 1 S 12:25; 26:10 (in battle), + בְּיַד of agent 1 S 27:1; cf. וְיֵשׁ נִסְפֶּה בְּלֹא מִשְׁפָּט Pr 13:23 and there is that is swept away for lack of justice.—1 Ch 21:12 read נוֹסָךְ (as ‖ 2 S 24:13, v. נוס). 2. be caught up, captured, Is 13:15 (‖ נִמְצָא).

Hiph. Impf. 1 s. אַסְפֶּה עָלֵימוֹ רָעוֹת Dt 32:23 I will catch up against them calamities, but read אֹסְפָה I will gather (√ אסף), or < אֹסִפָה (Di Dr Buhl Lex 13) I will add, i.e. multiply (√ יסף; v. Ges§ 69 h, note).

(BDB)

Let us look again at verse 17 and the word which Paul writes concerning air, which is ἀέρα (e-ra) the Noun air. The problem with a plain reading is it makes no sense in the context Paul is writing, nor would the idea of meeting Jesus up in the air make sense to his audience. It jumps out at us from the text as a “new teaching” about the day of the Lord and as a result many have attempted to understand the reason for being caught up in the

clouds and meeting Jesus in the air. Yet there isn't one as that isn't what he is talking about. Looking at the Abbott-Smith lexicon we find a nuance that is used in other texts:

ἀήρ, ἀέρος, ὁ,

in Hom., Hes., the lower air which surrounds the earth, as opp. to the purer αἰθήρ of the higher regions; generally, air (MM, VGT, s.v.): Ac 22:23, I Th 4:17, Re 9:2 16:17;

(Abbott-Smith)

This nuance of lower air which surrounds the earth, provides more insight into what Paul is hinting at. If Paul meant the believers would be meeting the Lord in the sky he could have used other words such as:

αἰθήρ (aith-ayr) – A purer air of the higher regions

οὐρανός (u-ran-us) – Heaven, sky

Either of these would have clarified that there would be a meeting between the believers and the Lord Jesus in the sky. Yet he does not as there is no such meeting. Paul is in fact referencing Ezekiel 43:7 "**… I will dwell among the children of Israel forever. ...**" (WEBU). Paul is providing insight into the prophecy given that Jesus has already removed the veil with his death. "**Behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom. The earth quaked and the rocks were split.**" Matthew 27:51 (WEBU), there is no longer separation between the believers and God's presence. Therefore when the Lord returns to the temple to dwell amongst the children of Israel, he will meet with them outside in the open air. Ezekiel is shown that the entire inner court is filled with God's glory in 47:5 "**The Spirit took me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the LORD's glory filled the house.**" (WEBU). It is no longer hidden in the holy of holies behind the veil.

So far we have shown some of the connection back to the Ezekiel prophecy concerning the day of Lord. We shall explore the wider contextual support for this interpretation which I believe is Paul's intended meaning in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 Putting it together

Here we will walk through the text taking into account the background knowledge we have acquired.

13 But we don't want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those who have fallen asleep, so that you don't grieve like the rest, who have no hope.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 (WEBU)

Here in verse 13 Paul is continuing his teaching of the believers concerning resurrection on the day of Lord, as he was cut short in his teaching previously.

4 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 15 For this we tell you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will in no way precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with God's trumpet. The dead in Christ will rise first,

1 Thessalonians 4:14-16 (WEBU)

In these verses Paul is referencing the prophecies in Zechariah and Daniel. In Zechariah 14:4 and the end of verse 5 " **4 His feet will stand in that day on the Mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, making a very great valley. Half of the mountain will move toward the north, and half of it toward the south. … The LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with you.**" (WEBU). In Daniel 12:2-3 it explains further "**2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who are wise will shine as the brightness of the expanse. Those who turn many to righteousness will shine as the stars forever and ever.**" (WEBU) As you can see here, that once Jesus has come again to the Mount of Olives the dead will rise first. Paul looks to clarify this as the believers arising first.

Verse 16 actually comes first in terms of timeline with the Lord descending from heaven to great fanfare. This is in reference to both Exodus 19:16-20 and Daniel 12:1. Noting specifically as God descends there is a lot of cloud, thunder, lightening and the shofar[5]. Once the Lord has descended to the Mount of Olives then verses 14 and 15 follow in the timeline with the dead rising.

17 then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. So we will be with the Lord forever.

1 Thessalonians 4:17 (WEBU)

5 A type of Ram's horn used at least since time of Moses commonly translated trumpet

Here in verse 17 Paul is explaining the next stage of that day by referencing Ezekiel 43:4-7. The Lord Jesus moves into the Temple from the Mount of Olives, clouds, smoke, fire and all the holy ones. At which point the believers that are alive, are then enveloped or “caught up in the clouds” on the holy Mount Zion alongside those risen. It is evocative of the Exodus 19 meeting with God, with additional implied meaning of the clouds as the glory of God as stated in Ezekiel 43:4 and Deuteronomy 5:22-24. As you can see there is no flying of the believers in the air, the Lord Jesus has already descended, raised the dead and moved into the Temple before we get to ἀέρα. Here he dwells openly (in the air) amongst the children of Israel forever as stated in Ezekiel 43:7. Which Paul also reiterates at the end of verse 17 “**So we will be with the Lord forever.** ” (WEBU).

Looking ahead to chapter 5:1-2, we see the believers are already largely educated on this topic.

1 But concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need that anything be written to you. 2 For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 (WEBU)

Further providing evidence from the Quill[6] of Paul himself, that he is providing insight into scripture that the believers are already familiar with.

6 An old means of writing using ink and a feather, replaced by pens.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

We have looked at who Paul was writing to, the knowledge level of scripture they had and the way in which Paul taught. By dissecting Paul's use of Pharisaic or Rabbinic explanation of the prophecies already known to the believers, we can see how he combines the knowledge of the first coming of the Messiah to that of the multiple prophecies concerning the day of the Lord used throughout this part of the epistle. The fact that believers already know the referenced prophecies, but haven't yet pieced the understanding together in light of the first coming of Jesus is not surprising. The difficulty of studying the scripture at a time when believers couldn't just look up references in an app would make the wider picture more difficult to interpret without specific insight from a Rabbi. However, Paul does this expertly bringing them together to provide insight on how believers will be resurrected on the day of the Lord.

Given the weight of the contextual evidence presented and the deeper understanding of the nuance around the words ἁρπαγησόμεθα and ἀέρα, I have hopefully shown that in verse 17, what Paul was referencing was in fact the prophecy of Ezekiel 47.

I leave you with the words of the Apostle Paul:

16 Always rejoice. 17 Pray without ceasing. 18 In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus toward you. 19 Don't quench the Spirit. 20 Don't despise prophecies. 21 Test all things, and hold firmly that which is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil.

23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely. May your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

24 He who calls you is faithful, who will also do it.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (WEBU)

Bibliography

A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, Brown-Driver-Briggs

A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament, Abbott-Smith

World English Bible Updated, ebible.org

Terminology

Believers – Commonly known as the church, in Thessalonica at the time it would have been more like a messianic synagogue. To avoid confusion and unintended images in the reader's mind I chose to use Believers to cover both the Jewish and Gentile Believers that made up the congregation.

Haftarah – The reading of the Prophets after the Torah portion on Shabbat.

Shabbat – Sabbath day of rest, Seventh Day, Saturday.

Shofar - A type of Ram's horn used at least since the time of Moses commonly translated trumpet.

Torah – The first five books of the Bible, Pentateuch.

About the Author

D. J. Hodges is a lay Anglican and has a desire for the church to have access into the original languages, having independently studied biblical Hebrew and is progressing in Aramaic and Greek. He had a varied religious life from growing up a non-denominational Christian to bouncing through Atheism, Taoism, New Age, exploring Judaism, before returning to Christ in 2022. When not studying he enjoys spending time with his wife and their 4 children. He sees a need for the church to have the ability to dig deep and understand the foundations of their faith as fundamental to building a strong and thriving community and is the driving force behind his study.